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ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE EARLY YEARS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

January, 1992

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

The ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION represents over 90 public boards of education from all regions of the province, serving over 1,700,000 students and adult learners. OPSBA speaks for public education in Ontario and represents the interest of the public school trustees to the government, the public and the media.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This submission was prepared by the OPSBA Curriculum Committee:

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Allan Jones, Vice-Chair	Nipigon-Red Rock	Northern
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OPSBA Response to Early Years Consultation Document

General Comments

The importance of the early years in children's subsequent educational achievement and overall development has been well documented. OPSBA recognizes that high quality early childhood education can be beneficial to young children, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and is pleased to provide comments on the issues raised in the Early Years Consultation document.

It must be stated, however, that a number of the central policy decisions with regard to the early years have already been made by the government. With no prior consultation with school boards, or other interested parties, major policy decisions requiring the mandatory provision of junior kindergarten, full-day senior kindergarten, and the role of schools in the provision of child care have been announced.

Decisions with regard to the deadline for the mandatory provision of kindergarten and junior kindergarten were made prior to the development of adequate program guidelines and teacher in-service activities. OPSBA stresses that there is the need for flexibility in both implementation dates and strategies in recognition of space and resource limitations of many boards. The need for flexibility is further heightened by the government's recent announcement to withdraw the remaining $50 million set aside in the 1991 Ontario budget to help meet school boards' implementation costs for junior kindergarten and kindergarten.

OPSBA compliments the workteam for writing a consultation document that is well organized, easy to read and broader in scope than the previous "restructuring initiatives" documents. We are disappointed, however, that the early years document failed to consider, in any way, the unique problems/difficulties of native students in this province. Our Task Force on Native Issues will be providing an analysis of the consultation document from the perspective of native trustees.

OPSBA commends the Ministry of Education for responding to concerns expressed by members of the education community and our Association with regard to the need for an overall framework within which to place the various restructuring initiatives. The formation of a sub-committee of the Learning Programs Advisory Council to develop this framework is appreciated.

Prior to discussing the sixteen identified issues in the early years consultation document, OPSBA would like to state a number of positions that we believe are

central to any discussion on the early years. Many of these points are not unique to the early years, have been mentioned before, and apply to the overall "restructuring" process.

- The "educative", "social" and "health" responsibilities of the education system need to be more clearly defined.
- Clarification of the relative roles of the provincial government and school boards in policy development and implementation is required.
- The coordination of the activities of schools and other community social services and agencies should be a priority.
- Teacher education and in-service is central to the success of any new initiative in education.
- The early years must be viewed as only one part of a continuum of learning which must be integrated with the formative years.
- The early identification and assessment process is central in the early years.
- The important role of parents in the education of their children in the early years must be stressed.
- The government must provide for school board flexibility in both timelines and strategies for implementation of any new initiative.

THE ISSUES
CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

Issue 1

Should the Ontario education system play a role in serving young children and their families with regard to the following?

a) Child Care
b) Prevention programs for children at risk of developing emotional or behavioral problems
c) Family counselling
d) Parenting courses
e) Breakfast Programs
f) Health care
g) Recreation
h) Partnerships with community and social agencies
i) Partnerships with service clubs
j) Partnerships with other ministries
k) Partnerships with other educational institutions
l) Other (please specify)

Expanding Role of the Education System

The range of responsibilities taken on by the education system has broadened over the years to include educative, social and health functions. This expansion has occurred for a number of reasons:

- expectations and responsibilities have been added by other Ministries, agencies and society in general;
- increasing centralization of policy making resulting in more mandated programs and specific delivery models;
- school boards themselves have taken on programs for which they have identified a need;
- growing awareness of public policy makers to social equity.

Education has taken on social, cultural and health responsibilities that had previously been provided and funded by other ministries and other agencies and institutions.

Provincially, programs have been added in an ad hoc fashion without appropriate consideration of the ability of the school to handle them or indeed, whether the school system is the most appropriate system to handle them.

OPSBA cannot support the continuation of this ad hoc expansion. As a result, OPSBA cannot answer the questions raised in Issue one in isolation from a more general examination of the fundamental role and responsibilities of the education system in today's society.

There is the need for the development of consensus on the responsibilities of the school system with regard to its "educative", "social" and "health" functions. There is the need for further clarification of the education system's responsibilities in relation to social and health issues and the relationship of school boards to other ministries and service providers.

The primary functions of the school system are teaching and learning; developing within young people the knowledge, skills and attitudes that lead to a successful transition to adulthood. However, there is no longer any doubt about the correlation between family characteristics and school success or between the occurrence of social, emotional and behavioral problems and academic achievement.

The school cannot ignore the needs of vulnerable children. The schools have assumed an ever expanding responsibility to respond to the needs of all children. Needy children cannot be ignored. But the capacity of school systems to provide the services that would be helpful to children at risk for social, emotional or behavioral problems is sorely limited. We have neither the formal mandate nor the resources.

Further development requires a careful examination of governance, management and funding so that service delivery is effective, coordinated, flexible and responsive. "Playing a role" in these areas can range from providing space for such programs to having the responsibility for the actual provision and funding of these programs.

As a first step for dealing with the expanded role of schools, the mandates of the Ministries of Education, Health and Community and Social Services must be more clearly defined at the policy level. This must include the definition and requirement for collaboration and integration of services at the community level. The education

of the child is a shared responsibility and this must be recognized through cooperation and the transfer of appropriate funds and/or human resources between these Ministries.

The need for linking and coordinating the activities of schools and other community social service agencies, at the local level, has long been recognized by school boards.

Questions of responsibilities cannot be separated from issues of governance and financing. OPSBA is in the process of receiving input from our member boards on a discussion guide which examines the relative roles of the education system, its governance and financing. Once the submissions have been analyzed and a position paper developed, OPSBA will be in a position to respond to questions on the responsibilities of the education system.

Erosion of School Board Autonomy

There has been an increasing trend towards the provincial mandating of both programs and the way in which they are to be implemented. In responding to a number of the questions posed in the early years consultation document, the option chosen may result in the further "piecemeal" erosion of the decision making powers of school boards. These decisions should not be treated in isolation from the overall question of the relative role of the province and the school boards in setting and implementing policy.

There needs to be clarification of the relative roles of the province and the school board in defining and achieving the responsibilities of the education system. Should there be revisions to the current model?

Parental Involvement

OPSBA supports greater parental involvement in the education of their children.

The educational system needs to get parents involved in the education of their children particularly during the early years. Research has shown that parental involvement is one of the most important indicators of academic success in later years. The government needs to develop strategies for involving the family in the school.

If the focus for the early years is to be on prevention and early intervention, then it is clear that the only agency which has daily contact with children is the school. In the early years, parents are more likely to have contact with their children's school than with any other agency. The development of effective home-school links is critical to the success of many children.

In presenting the context for change, the government needs to make sure that the public at large is aware of and supportive of these processes. The Ministry of Education needs to make more of an effort to make taxpayer aware of changing context and changes in education.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 2

Should provincial policy describe learning in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten with regard to the following?

a) role of play
b) role of language
c) role of adults
d) areas of growth

The Ministry of Education needs to develop a statement of its philosophy and pedagogical rationale for early childhood education. Parents, the general public, as well as educators, need to have a clear understanding as to the expectations and goals of the early years program.

OPSBA has some concerns that, in focusing on specific issues such as French immersion, French as a second language, and ESL/ESD issues; the workteam is ignoring the need to develop an overall model or rationale for the value of early childhood education and its expected role in the education of the child.

The Ministry should develop policy guidelines to ensure consistency across the province in key areas of curriculum. These guidelines must include both the process and content of learning. However, the guidelines must not be extremely prescriptive and should encourage curriculum integration. Provincial policy must allow for interpretation by boards for individual schools to professionally meet the needs of local communities.

The early years policy and curriculum must be consistent with that of the Formative Years. OPSBA feels that the programs in kindergarten must be clearly linked with the programs in the primary grades. There must be clarification of the links between these programs and the Ministry must deal with the whole question of how kindergarten should be integrated with the primary grades. What impact will full day senior kindergarten have on the grade one program?

Although OPSBA concurs that children in the early years learn through play; care

must be taken to ensure that this term is clearly defined. There is a great deal of misunderstanding, by the general public, of the role of "play" in learning and its significant educative role.

The role of language must be stressed.

With regard to the role of adults in learning, the importance of the role of parents in the education of the child must be stressed and linkages between parents and the school developed.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 3

Should provincial policy describe indoor and outdoor learning materials and equipment for use in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten?

OPSBA recognizes that there is the need for standards to assist school boards in making decisions with regard to equipment for use in Junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs. In addition to educative issues, health and safety issues must be clearly addressed. We do not, however, want the government to prescribe required equipment for each kindergarten program in the province.

One suggestion for providing assistance for school boards is the development of a circular, with similar status to Circular 14 for textbooks. The circular would list "approved equipment" and learning materials suitable for the early years programs.

There must also be adequate provincial finances for the purchase, storage and upkeep of these materials.

Issue 4

Should the Ministry of Education develop a policy on "refrancisation" to ensure that school boards address the needs of children who have a wide range of linguistic abilities and are attending schools where French is the language of instruction?

The whole question of varying linguistic abilities must be addressed by all school boards in the development of programs which suit the different learning abilities and styles of the individual student whether he or she is being taught in the English or French language.

The adequate provision of funds for resources which include learning materials and in-service programs must be available for all teachers and schools.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 5

Should provincial policy provide direction to school boards regarding the introduction of immersion French programs in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten in schools where English is the language of instruction?

The provision of immersion French programs is at the discretion local school boards who make program decisions on the basis of community interest and need. The provision of these programs and their timing as to whether they start during kindergarten or later should remain a local board responsibility.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 6

Should the Ministry of Education develop a policy regarding the provision of a language-training program such as English as a Second Language and English Skills Development in schools where English is the language of instruction?

The issues surrounding the education of immigrant and refugee children whose first language is not English are of increasing importance to many school boards. These issues are not restricted to the provision of language training.

The successful establishment of immigrant children and children of refugee claimants requires the provision of specialized services including second language training; settlement services, assessment and counselling and specialized staffing.

There is a shortage of qualified personnel to teach in these programs. There is the need for more resources, adequate teacher in-service programs and financing. There is the need for inter-ministerial cooperation in the development of new policies for dealing with immigration and settlement issues.

School boards have, to the best of their abilities and with limited resources, been responsive to the needs of children in this area. Rather than the Ministry developing a policy regarding the provision of ESL/ESD; there is the need for the provincial government to take a proactive role in dealing with this issue with the federal government.

The federal government has established a five year immigration plan which will have significant impact on school boards in this province. The Minister of Education needs to make the education of immigrant and refugee children a priority with the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 7

Should provincial policy provide direction to school boards with regard to staffing in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten as it relates to the following?

a)class size
b)pupil-adult ratio
c)teacher aids for children with special needs
d)other (please specify)

The Ministry of Education should leave implementation issues to school boards unless it is prepared to fund the total cost of these programs.

Class size issues are, in many cases, part of the negotiation process between school boards and teachers. If class size continues to be mandated by the province (as in the case of grades 1 and 2), the impact on negotiations and collective agreements in terms of cost and related factors must be carefully analyzed and appropriate provincial funding provided.

In developing programs for children with special needs, school boards provide assistance for these children as assessed on an individual basis by the Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRC) in consultation with the child, the teacher, the parent and the principal of the school.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

Issue 8

Should provincial policy provide direction to school boards with regard to procedures for assessment, evaluation and reporting of children's individual patterns of development and learning?

1. **Assessment**
   a)Teacher's observations of children
   b)Parent's observations of children
   c)Child care educators' observations of children
   d)Other (please specify)

2. **Evaluation**
   a)Early and Ongoing Identification of Learning Abilities and Needs
   b)Promotion
   c)Retention
   d)Other (please specify)

3. **Reporting**
   a)Written reports
   b)Parent-teacher conferences
   c)Other (please specify)

Assessment of individual patterns of development and learning must be based on clearly defined criteria and goals for children in the early years. The areas of growth described in the consultation document are a good starting point for the development of these "benchmarks" for the early years which should include cognitive, social, motivational, self confidence components.

A variety of assessment and evaluation methods including observations and student profiles should be utilized. Extensive development of the knowledge and skills of teachers in evaluation is required in order to achieve this goal.

Assessment and evaluation in the early years should form the basis for program development in the formative years. Emphasis should be on assessment as the basis of identifying learning skills and areas in which development and improvement including remedial services are required.

With regard to evaluation, the early ongoing identification of learning abilities and needs is critical in the early years especially for those children with learning difficulties. Special education is minimally addressed in the consultation document. This is critical in light of the significant role that schools play in the early identification of children with "exceptionalities" and the development of remedial programs for these students. Resources (both financial and human) are required to provide for early identification and treatment.

OPSBA does not feel that the use of the word "promotion" is appropriate for junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs. We are also surprised that the workteam did not consider the issue of ungraded school which would include both kindergarten and the primary division. In an ungraded school, children in the primary division could be treated as part of a continuum in which various groupings, including family groupings, could be explored. The possibility of pilot projects with ungraded school organization should be considered.

Reporting of a child's progress in terms of general growth related skills should be regularly provided to parents so that they can be viewed as partners in the learning experiences of their child.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Issue 9

Should special provisions in the regulations under the Education Act be included to permit children who are not yet three years and eight months old to attend special programs to deal with the following?

a)identified special needs

b)linguistic needs

c) other (please specify)

There is the need for the Ministry of Education to clarify the current provisions in the Education Act with regard to the provision of early admission to programs for children with special needs. The rationale for allowing hearing-handicapped children to attend special programs needs to be articulated.

There are a number of service agencies and institutions delivering programs for children with special needs. Schools may not necessarily be the best place for the provision of these programs. This issue should be part of the process of examining various governance models and delivery models which will further the integration of children's services. No one model will be best for all children or all school boards. Existing resources of both a financial and human nature must be carefully examined in determining the best service delivery model for the child with special needs.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Issue 10

Should provincial policy provide direction to school boards with regard to flexible entry and attendance in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten?

Decisions with regard to flexible entry into junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs cannot be made in isolation from general considerations over both program and class organization in the rest of the primary division. Flexible entry would be a more viable option if education in the primary division occurred in an ungraded school organization. Flexible entry cannot mean that students can enter programs whenever they wish. In order to assess the impact of flexible entry, OPSBA would be supportive of the introduction, on a pilot basis, of two entry points in the school year.

With regard to "flexible attendance", OPSBA feels that there is the need for clarification of this term. Currently, attendance in junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs is optional but once students are enroled in the program, attendance becomes compulsory. If it is the intent to make attendance flexible throughout the year, we would have major concerns in a number of areas including: the difficulty of maintaining a developmental program if parents can withdraw children when they choose; and staffing and budgeting implications.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Issue 11

Should provincial policy provide direction to school boards with regard to the development, implementation and revision of plans for the coordination of school based child care for school aged children and Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten programs?

Before the Ministry develops policies to assist school boards in coordinating the activities of school based child care centres and schools, there is the need for clarification of the government's policy with regard to the role of schools in the provision of child care.

This clarification must be undertaken as part of the overall examination of the responsibilities of the school system. The government must also deal with issues that have been identified by school boards already involved in child care.

Many school boards, recognizing a variety of community needs for child care, have chosen to become involved in the child care system, most often through the provision of school space to house community-based child care centres.

OPSBA believes that the role of the educational system in the provision of child care services should be a matter of local board autonomy, not legislated by the government. The Day Nurseries Act and the Education Act should be revised to permit boards to obtain licences for school-age child care programs. Any amendments should be permissive in nature.

School boards have expressed the need for a high level of coordination in the provision of child care services. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community and Social Services must provide ongoing funding to school boards engaged in providing school-aged child care to hire ECE trained coordinators or consultants to supervise the boards' child care activities; and, to establish, at the local level, board-based Child Care Advisory Committees which would make recommendations to the board on matters affecting the establishment and

development of child care services. The administrative costs associated with these programs must be covered and should not come out of education dollars.

The issue of the quality of the child care program and its interaction with the school program must be dealt with. If the children in care attend school in the same building, viable links, cooperation and coordination will be needed to prevent unnecessary duplication in activities and to provide for both programs' components and goals.

TEACHER EDUCATION

The central role of the teacher in implementing any of the "restructuring" initiatives has been stressed by OPSBA in all of its submissions. The early years is no exception.

Before any new programs are mandated, there must be adequate time and resources for teacher in-service programs to be developed and provided.

Issue 12

Should provincial policy determine specific basic qualifications for the certification of teachers in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten?

Although OPSBA supports the requirement that teachers in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten programs should have a primary specialist certificate, given the shortage of teachers, the declining enrolment in a number of boards and geographical variations in teacher resources; there must be provisions for flexibility in this requirement.

Issue 13

Should additional training components on Junior Kindergarten, Kindergarten and child care coordination be provided in principal and supervisory officer courses?

If the role of the school in the provision of child care is clarified and the need for coordination identified, then it only makes sense to ensure that principals and supervisory officers receive adequate training for this expansion of their roles.

We would stress, however, that there is the need for adequate training for principals and supervisory officers in the area of early childhood education in general as it

relates to the provision of junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs. Recognition of the importance of these programs in determining future school success must be stressed.

Issue 14

Should the Ministry of Education support school boards in the delivery of professional development programs for teachers in Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten by the following?

a)providing guidelines and models
b)providing models for mentorship programs and peer coaching
c)developing training materials for professional development
d)facilitating the establishment of teacher centres
e)encouraging partnerships with other agencies and institutions
f)other (please specify)

Any assistance the government is willing to provide with regard to the professional development of teachers, including financial support, would be welcome.

TEACHER EDUCATION

Issue 15

Should programs be created to link the training of early childhood educators and teachers so that early childhood educators can be certified as teachers and vice versa?

Examination of the role of early childhood educators (ECE) in junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs should not be restricted to a question on the linkage of training programs.

There needs to be a careful examination of the role that ECE graduates can play in the provision of kindergarten programs. OPSBA supports the recommendation of the Legislative Select Committee on Education that a task force be established to examine the competencies, skill and experience needed to teach young children. The task force should evaluate existing college and Faculty programs to determine how well their curricula and approach are providing these capacities; and, explore how the colleges and Faculties can more effectively recognize each other's programs and draw upon each other's resources and strengths.

OPSBA believes that areas that should be included in the study include:

- What qualifications should be required for teachers in the early years?
- Is it necessary to maintain the current certification requirements?
- What role can ECE graduates play in the provision of junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs?
- What implications will pay equity and employment equity have for school boards if ECE graduates are involved in program delivery in the education system?

- What in-service and upgrading programs need to be developed for both ECE graduates and teachers and what costs will be involved?

The Ministry also needs to undertake an examination of the role of teacher aids in kindergarten programs. Currently there are no qualification requirements for teacher aids who participate in the junior kindergarten and kindergarten program in schools. Boards should be setting up some kind of ongoing training programs for teacher aids.

If early childhood specialists are to have a role in the junior kindergarten and kindergarten programs, then the Ministry of Education must also address the issue of the current shortage of qualified early childhood education specialists.

Issue 16

Should the Ministry of Education offer professional development to teachers in schools where French is the language of instruction to enhance their knowledge, awareness and understanding of the cultural and linguistic needs of French-language children in Ontario?

In recognition of the need for teachers who are adequately trained to effectively carry out their job as educators in the early years, professional development for teachers should be provided, on the basis of need, for all teachers.

Conclusions

OPSBA welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation process for the early years and recognizes the importance of the early years in children's subsequent educational achievement.

In addition to the specific comments provided for each of the identified issues in the consultation document, we believe that any discussion of educational restructuring must consider the following issues:

- The "educative", "social" and "health" responsibilities of the education system need to be more clearly defined.
- Clarification of the relative roles of the provincial government and school boards in policy development and implementation is required.
- The coordination of the activities of schools and other community social services and agencies should be a priority.
- Teacher education and in-service is central to the success of any new initiative in education.
- The early years must be viewed as only one part of a continuum of learning which must be integrated with the formative years.
- The early identification and assessment process is central in the early years.
- The important role of parents in the education of their children in the early years must be stressed.
- The government must provide for school board flexibility in both timelines and strategies for implementation of any new initiative.